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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 002406

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SUBJECT: CNE PERFORMANCE IN MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS CONFIRMS  
DISTRUST

Classified By: ACTING DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION JOHN S. CREAMER FOR 1.4 (D)

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Summary  
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1. (C) The National Electoral Council (CNE) showed its continued bias in favor of the governing coalition during municipal elections on Sunday. Despite media and opposition reports of low turnout, CNE President Jorge Rodriguez arbitrarily extended voting hours twice, citing problems in some states and CNE information showing a steady stream of voters at polls nationwide. Sumate Vice President Maria Corina Machado and Justice First Secretary General Gerardo Blyde denounced both extensions as illegal and contrary to the observer reports. Opposition CNE member Sobella Mejia said the second extension violated CNE regulations. While voting appeared to proceed smoothly in Caracas, some irregularities and technical problems complicated the process in various states. The final results of the elections are still pending, but the MVR appears to be winning most seats. The CNE's actions highlight the need for credible, international observation to ensure fairness and transparency in the December legislative elections. End summary.

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CNE Does Its Part for Government Turnout  
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2. (U) Despite reports of dismal turnout, National Electoral Council (CNE) President Jorge Rodriguez arbitrarily extended voting hours twice, the first time for two hours and the second time for an additional hour. Rodriguez based his decision on alleged delays in voting that occurred in several states, particularly Zulia and Carabobo, and on data from the fingerprint machines, which indicated that approximately 2,800 people were voting per minute late in the afternoon. The Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) took advantage of the extension to get more of its supporters to the polls. Several MVR officials, including President Hugo Chavez, urged their supporters to vote and the MVR coalition accelerated its Operation Galope-- going door to door to drag more voters to the polls. Approximately 490,000 people were able to vote during the extended hours.

3. (U) The opposition was quick to criticize the decision as illegal and suspicious. Sumate Vice President Maria Corina Machado said the extensions violated the letter and spirit of the Law for Suffrage and Citizen Participation. Justice First Secretary General Gerardo Blyde not only denounced both extensions as illegal, but said the estimated voting rate used to justify the second extension contradicted what his party's observers were reporting. He feared the CNE would use the extensions to illegally inflate the governing MVR vote totals. Even CNE opposition member Sobella Mejias denounced the second extension as a violation of CNE regulations.

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Minor Irregularities  
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4. (C) Voting generally went smoothly, despite a few problems. Embassy observers deployed throughout Caracas reported few irregularities, while newspaper, opposition, and international observers reported limited problems outside the capital. In opposition-led Zulia state, late or absent poll workers were responsible for delays in poll openings. In one municipality in Carabobo, MVR officials were accused of bussing in voters the night before the election to help the local MVR mayoral candidate win. Carabobo Governor Luis Acosta Carles also was reported for violating electoral norms by congratulating the candidate and predicting an MVR victory inside a polling center. The electoral council of one municipality in Aragua state was dismissed after several irregularities were reported. Some voters claimed that their polling stations were changed without notice or that their

names did not appear on voting rolls even though they had received written confirmation of their voting centers from the CNE. Rodriguez said only a fraction of the voting

machines had to be replaced and only five electronic notebooks in Nueva Esparta failed.

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Abstention Meets Expectations  
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15. (U) Preliminary projections indicate abstention levels were consistent with previous local elections. Preliminary CNE estimates put the abstention rate at 70 percent. Colombian National Electoral Council Vice President Guillermo Reyes, an accredited international observer, speculated turnout of between 18 and 24 percent. Emboffs' observations in the Caracas area track with Reyes' estimate. In fact, more people were waiting in lines to buy food at local markets or to board busses for the beach than to vote. Poll workers told Emboffs they estimated an 80 percent abstention rate. Sumate estimates abstention at 78 percent. In conversations with Emboffs, most non-voters cited indifference as their reason for not participating, with only a few citing distrust of the CNE.

16. (U) Still, opposition leaders and most newspapers are claiming that so-called record abstention was an indictment of the CNE. Maria Corina Machado hailed the abstention as a sign to the world that the CNE lacks credibility. International observers accredited by the CNE downplayed the high abstention and said that turnout for this election was no different than in other Latin American countries' local elections. Some ruling party leaders are consoling themselves with the fact that more of their supporters voted than the opposition. Chavista supporter and newspaper publisher Servando Garcia Ponce denied that the low turnout reflected public distrust of the CNE, noting that Chavistas had little reason to fear the CNE and yet many had stayed away from the polls.

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MVR Leading the Pack  
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17. (C) Results continue to trickle in, but observers expect a massive MVR victory. Jesus Suarez, the Accion Democratica (AD) Secretary General for Caracas, told poloff the MVR won 13 municipal positions in Caracas and press reports give MVR two mayorships. AD gubernatorial candidate in Amazonas state Bernabe Gutierrez appeared to be leading with 40 percent of the vote last night, but Suarez thought Gutierrez would lose to the Patria Para Todos (PPT) candidate even if the CNE had to resort to trickery. PJ leader Juan Carlos Caldera told poloff that preliminary results indicate PJ won municipal seats in Tachira, Zulia, and Falcon states, which is an improvement over its showing in 2000 when the party won only in Miranda state. As of this morning, the opposition had also registered wins in its strongholds of Baruta, Chacao and El Hatillo.

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Comment  
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18. (C) The outcome of this election was not a surprise. With voter participation rates falling well below the 40 percent called for by President Chavez, it appears the CNE tried to inflate turnout by extending voting hours. Still, even the CNE was forced to eventually accept the high abstention rate in the face of overwhelming media footage of empty voting centers. Although the CNE's decision to extend voting hours does not appear to have had a significant impact on the final results, its arbitrary actions in favor of the Chavista candidates have reinforced its image as a biased, unfaithful arbiter of the electoral process. Its actions highlight the need for credible, comprehensive international observation of the December legislative elections.  
Brownfield

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